

Exploring the Issue of Child Labor Through Photographs and Data

Description:

In this activity, students examine two photographs of child laborers from the 1880s, noting sex and approximate age of the workers, type of work and working conditions, and comparing the two photographs.

Standard:

The Development of the Industrial United States (1870-1900) Standard 3: The rise of the American labor movement and how political issues reflected social and economic changes



Activity Instructions for Students

The first U.S. census to report child labor numbers was in 1870. In a report of the findings from that census, more than 750,000 workers were counted under the age of 15, not including children who worked for their families in businesses or on farms. By 1900, more than 1,750,000 American children under the age of 15 were working. They often worked in unhealthy and dangerous conditions, and did so for very low wages.

In this activity you will examine historical data on child workers and two historical photographs of child workers in order to discuss and better understand the effects of industrial employment of children during this period. Use the two child labor photographs to complete the chart. Students should then use both the table and two photographs to answer the discussion questions in the “Activity Assessment” section.

Gainful Workers, Aged 10–14, in the United States: 1870–1930 (in thousands)

| Year | Number of workers 10-14 | Total population 10-14 | Percent of population 10-14 that work | Total workers all ages | Workers 10-14 as % of total workforce | Workers 10-14: % Nonfarm |
|------|-------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1870 | 765 | 4,786 | 15.98% | 12,925 | 5.92 | 47.00 |
| 1880 | 1,118 | 5,715 | 19.56% | 17,392 | 6.43 | 50.64 |
| 1890 | 1,504 | 7,034 | 21.38% | 23,318 | 6.50 | 57.38 |
| 1900 | 1,750 | 8,080 | 21.66% | 29,073 | 6.02 | 62.47 |
| 1910 | 1,622 | 9,107 | 17.81% | 37,371 | 4.34 | 68.98 |
| 1920 | 1,417 | 10,641 | 13.32% | 42,434 | 3.34 | 73.02 |
| 1930 | 667 | 12,005 | 5.56% | 48,830 | 1.37 | 78.55 |

Source: Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997), Series A119-134 and D75-84.

Activity Assessment

| | Miners | Berry Pickers |
|--------------------|--------|---------------|
| Sex | | |
| Approximate age | | |
| Type of work | | |
| Working conditions | | |

Suggested Discussion Questions:

1. What information does the data table describe? What trends do you see in the data? What data points do you find interesting or surprising?
2. Does one of the jobs depicted in the photos look harder? Which one? Why?

3. Using your prior knowledge about this period, explain why so many children had to work like adults? Do you think it was fair? Why or why not?

4. If the photo of the berry pickers had been taken on a family farm instead of a larger commercial farm - would that have made the work seem more reasonable for children? Why or why not?

Teacher's Notes

Learning Objectives

- Students will be able to interpret a table of historical data on child labor in order to gain a better understanding of the causes and consequences of the industrial employment of children.
- Students will be able to compare and draw meaning from two historical photographs of child laborers in order to gain a better understanding of the causes and consequences of the industrial employment of children.
- Students will be able to relate the information in the data table and historic photographs to prior knowledge about this historic period and explain child labor in historical context.

Instructions for Teachers

The following is a suggested use for the “Exploring the Issue of Child Labor Through Photographs and Data” activity. You may find other strategies for using the activity in your instruction, depending on your students’ needs and the subject taught.

Before this Activity

Have students work individually or in groups to review the data table and the child labor photos.

During this Activity

Have students complete the "Activity Assessment" questions. Students will use the photographs in order to complete the chart. Students should conduct a summary discussion about child labor, including what they know about how the problem was addressed in the United States, and that child labor conditions that still exist today in the world.

After this Activity

Review students' responses to the "Activity Assessment" prompts, addressing any misconceptions or mistakes as you review.

Optional Activity Extension

Have students graph the data (either raw numbers or percentages of overall workforce) from the historical data table in order to further explore the trends in the data and how they relate to larger social and political issues during this period.